

# The Athenian Mercury:

Saturday, August 26. 1693.

**Ques.** 1. **I** Shall give you a very strange Account of a Boy in Durham: But first it will be necessary to acquaint you that I am a private School-master in the City, and that this Boy having gone to School about Nine or Ten Years in all, is now Learning with me, and hath been my Scholar above Three Years last past: He is a Gentlemans Son, and a lusty well Complexion'd Youth, aged (I think) about fifteen.

Now this same Boy, by all the Means that have been hitherto, or could be used, could never yet be made to know his Letters; and if that were all, you would perhaps think it no great matter, but here is the Mystery, that in one thing he seems to have a strong Memory, and in another none at all: He knows the Powers of Letters, but can remember nothing at all of their Figure or Shape: He remembers the Force of Letters in Spelling, and how they ought to sound in a Word; he can pronounce Words plain enough, and spell Syllables, and put them together, if one tell him the Letters, but not otherwise. He cannot remember what such Letters are call'd, but as soon as he hears them nam'd, he will presently tell you what they spell, which ordinarily with Children is the harder Task.

So that, by naming of the Letters he can judge of their Powers, that is, he knows well enough the difference in pronouncing between *b* and *p*, between *d* and *t*, and between *s* and *z*, which in whispering (says Dr. Holder) are not distinct at all: But from the Figures of Letters he can by no means gather their Names, or how they are to be called. Let him be told a thousand times, that a round Letter is called *o*, and that a long Letter with a Point above is called *i*: If you turn the Leaf, he remembers nothing of it, nor can I find that he has any distinct Notion of Difference between a Circle and a Right Line. And yet he is no Fool, he sees and hears as well as any Body, he can Play at such Games and Sports as Boys use in this Country, and knows the Rules therein to be observed, some of which are not very easie, and require a Memory; and sometimes he will give an Answer that looks like something of Wit.

This last Year I have been Teaching him to Write, in hopes that making Letters would bring him to remember them, but I cannot yet find the Effect I expected: For tho' he can Write his Name, and make all the Alphabet pretty fair, yet still he does not know them: He can indeed Name them forward and backward, as they stand in the row, and if you ask him them skipping here and there, he will for the most part hit right in that place, and this he could have done two or three Years ago in his Primmer; but ask him one of these Letters in another place, and he knows no more what to call it than if it were a *Syriack* or *Arabick* Character.

Now this seems to be purely Memory without Judgment, for he remembers a Series of Names as they follow one another, either in a direct or reverse Order, but he has no judgment of the Characters by their shape; he cannot distinguish one from another, and therefore cannot tell that such a Name belongs to such a Figure.

And yet when he can make a Nice Distinction between the Sound of two Letters, and from the Name of every Letter when he hears it, can collect its Powers, this methinks looks like something of Judgment: But then why he should be able to make an Inference from Hearing rather than from Seeing, and why he should not as well remember the Name of a Letter by its Figure, as the Nature of it by hearing it Nam'd, is beyond my Philosophy.

This then being the Matter of Fact, these two Enqui-

ries do from hence naturally offer themselves: First; *Wherein the Defect of this Boy's Capacity doth consist?* And, Secondly, *How the same may be so far remedy'd, that if possible he may be Taught to Read?* This would be not only a Kindness to himself and to the Family to which he belongs, but a Benefit also to the Publick.

**Answ.** Indeed this is a very odd sort of a Relation, and it's enough to puzzle our Philosophy to give a positive Answer. The most probable Reasons of the Boy's Incapacity to Learn, may possibly be these: The Fibres that run from the Eye to the Brain must be defective either in their Situation, or if rightly situated may be Imperfect, Obstructed, &c. whereby they are disabled from leaving any Impression on that part of the Brain where the Faculty of Memory does officiate; but if so, this must be general, and the Boy can remember nothing that he receives by the Sense of Seeing, which it would have been no little satisfaction if taken Notice of in the stating of the Case. Dr. Burnet (now Bishop of Sarum) in his Letters gives an Account of one that was Blind, but was Taught to understand Letters by feeling, having the Letters made in Wood or other hard Matter, and by feeling an Idea of the Form was impress'd on the Memory, and the Ear supply'd the rest for knowing the Powers and Spelling of those Letters. Perhaps this Method would take with this Boy. Or possibly the Defect may be owing to the Fancy of the Mother in the Act of Conception, the imagining some unaccountable Antipathy to Letters, &c. and if so, there's no Remedy but Patience, for all Tryals will prove ineffectual.

**Quest. 2.** *Gentlemen,* I have had the Ill Fortune, tho' sent three times to you, never to get an Answer to this Question, which I hope it is Intelligible: Pray a speedy Answer to it now, which will Oblige

*Your assur'd Friend and Humble Servant.*

May 14th. 1658. about One a Clock in the Morning, a Droughty Sealon, the Skye clear in the Mine-Country in Staffordshire, it happened that I having had some Occasion abroad, and being upon an high ground, suddenly a great Light shone all the adjacent ground about, when looking up I saw a great Flame of Fire, burning and frysing like to the great pieces of Iron-mettal when it comes out of the Forge-fires, but in shape of a Dragon, as it is usually painted, only the Tail was brushy like a Broom, seeming five or six Yards long, and gliding through the Air sloping downwards, with Drops of Fire falling from it as thick as Rain, in manner as Sparks from a Flint, but much greater; after it had gone in that manner two Miles as I conceived after I first saw it, it took upon the Earth in a Pasture called Ribden, about a Mile as I guessed from the place where I stood; and running in a streight Line some space, decayed by degrees, and at length wholly disappeared. Some time after I went to View the place where I apprehended it fell, and found some pieces or small fragments of Lead and Copper-Oars, cast up by Moles and other Accidents upon the Superficies, but could not obtain Liberty to search or digg till about six Years ago, when presently in the very same place I discover'd a rich Vein of Copper running in a streight Line, just as this Scistillation did, which is at this present in work, and holds extraordinary good.

**Question,** *Whether this Corruscation or Fiery Dragon, as some call it, be any thing to the generation or production of the Mettal, or of bringing it to its Maturity or Perfection? or whether before that time there might be Mettals in that place perfectly concocted, as they are now found, or only Fumes, Quires, or Oyles, lying in those subterranean Wombs or Cavities? or if Mettals, Whether is such quantities as they are now found? or whether they might not be of another sort, as Iron, Lead,*

Lead, &c. and by this Meteor suffer a Transmutation? for it appears there hath been a mighty Heat there in the Bowels of the Earth, the very Rocks in the Vein being burned to Lime, and a dark sonry substance lying all along with the Oar as if it were the Dross or Excrement of the same, as likewise a green Vitriol dispersed every where amongst the Metal, and melted as if by Fire in several curious Shapes or Formes, as like Iſicles, Tobacco-stops, hollow Globes, Snail-horns, &c. which Vitriol doth also tincture or inuermix with all the Metal in greater or lesser quantities, to the very Heart or Center thereof, being like a Sperm or Seed to it; for where that is wanting either in greater or smaller pieces, it is Barren, and Dead, and Cold, no Metal at all. These things deserve a deep and Philosophical Consideration, therefore I desire your Opinion of them, to whom I do humbly submit them?

*Answ.* We have already somewhere given an Account of these fiery Exhalations, which represent themselves to us sometimes in the form of Dragons, Darts, Swords, Dishes, Tubs, Horns, Lamps, Torches, Axes, Rods, &c. which are compos'd of a certain Bituminous and Oily Matter; but it's not only improbable but impossible, that (as in the Quæſtio[n] propos'd) these Corruſcations should either Transmute or Generate Metals. As to the Generation of Fossils, particularly the Metallic, Robaut gives a pretty Account of it, and doubtless this Instance of the green Vitriol dispers'd every where amongst the Metal like a fort of Seed, and where it's wanting the Veins become Barren, does mightily confirm what our later Philosophers have said in this Case. The Querist may rest affur'd, that those Veins he mentions were in being before the Apparition of his fiery Meteor, which are more frequently seen in Countreys full of Mines, because the Exhalations of such places are more proper for the Generation of 'em; and as for their kindling, it's generally suppos'd to be done after the same manner that Thunder is, viz. like that of the Stone call'd the Pyrites.

*Quæſt. 3.* On Thursday the 27<sup>th</sup>. of July, 1693. Sailing down the River of Medway from Chatham to Sheerness, about six a Clock in the Morning, there appear'd a strange Sun: I observed it to be about 28 Degrees from the true Sun to the South, and both of an equal Distance from the Horizon; the Skye was a little Overcast, yet not so much but that the true Sun shin'd pretty clear, the false one being much inferior to it for Lustre, yet seemed to have the same Dimensions and Motion; it continued about three quarters of an Hour, and vanish'd gradually. Pray give your Judgment of the said Sun, and from whence it did proceed?

*Answ.* The Sun fills the Air with its Images or Species, which pass quite thro' the same, unless they be reflected by some Body that is smooth and resplendent in its Surface, but Opake at the Bottom; such are Looking-Glasses and Water, whether it be upon the Earth or in the Clouds: Now when a smooth Cloud that is ready to fall down into Rain, happens to be opposite against the Sun (being terminated either by its own profundity, or some other Opake Body) it represents the Figure or Image of the Sun; and if there happen to be another opposite to this first, it reflecteth the Figure in the same manner as a Looking-Glass opposite to that wherein we look receives the Species from the former, and represents the same; and if we may believe Seneca, there is nothing less worthy of Admiration: For if no one wonders to see the representation of the Sun here below in clear Water, or any other resplendent Body, it can be no great Wonder that the same Sun imprints his Image as well on high as below, not in one Cloud, or two only, but also in many, as Pliny affirms he himself saw. This Multiplicity of Suns (which are called *Parbelij*) generally, tho' not always, happens either about the Rising or Setting of the Sun: First, Because the Refraction which is necessary for seeing them is not so well made to our Eyes, which is more remote when the Sun is in the Meridian. Secondly, Because when the Sun is in the Meridian he is hotter, and does not allow the Cloud any time to stay, but dissolves it as soon as it becomes opposite to him, which he does not at his Rising or Setting, being then more weak. The same Cause that shews us two or three Suns, did also represent three Moons under the Consulship of C. Domitius

and C. Fannius; as also three other which appeared in the Year 1314. for three Months together, which impression is called *Paroselene*, and cannot be made but at Full Moou.

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